

Service delivery and local governance in a crisis situation

An adapted approach of
VNG International in Myanmar



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Introduction

On 1st of February 2021 the military coup happened in Myanmar and our project activities came to a standstill; our project partner Loka Ahlinn Social Development Network (LASDN) immediately put all activities on hold, strongly rejecting this illegitimate coup. In line with the European Union and the Government of the Netherlands, we adopted the principle of non-engagement with the regime but remained committed to support the people in Myanmar and keep our governance focus. This paper captures our efforts of the past year, continuing two local governance projects and learning and developing a crisis approach. We experienced (1) the relevance of 'keeping a presence on the ground', (2) the need to allow flexibility to adapt beyond existing project frameworks (3) and the shift from partnership to localised leadership.

The coup turned our work upside down, for the organisation and the projects. Managing such a sudden change has many challenges; drafting emergency scenario's, prioritising staff safety and cyber security, dealing with finances in a nearly collapsing banking system and business continuation. Not knowing what would happen, end of February, we moved to a new, much smaller office that we share with a Dutch training company. The Inclusive Green Growth in Cities - DEALS project, funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs we implement directly, the Municipal Accountability, Governance, and Inclusive Communities (MAGIC) project, funded by the European Commission, is implemented in partnership with LASDN. Our third project, the National Community Driven Development project implemented by the Department of Rural Development (DRD) stopped because the World bank withdrew. We had no choice but to close down two project locations and to send the project staff home. This was really tough. For DEALS and MAGIC all project activities were now on hold; with our donors we negotiated (partial) suspension conditions whilst figuring out about non-engagement.

The project hierarchies started fading, whether VNG International or LASDN staff, we connect online and talk about everything that needs to be talked about. Together we continuously assess the situation in the townships, in particular the dynamics within the municipalities and the Ward Administrators appointed by the State Administrative Council (SAC - i.e. military led government), but also the safety and wellbeing of staff and their families and communities. We attended online meetings with the INGO Forum and joined our local governance network in webinars to exchange our experiences and research; the publications of the Centre for Good Governance¹ in particular proved helpful in finding our (local governance) crisis approach.

In MAGIC we kept the project offices open or relocated them to safer locations. In DEALS the office was in the municipality, so the project coordinator started working from home, which she already did during the first Covid waves. Main priority was staying in contact with the staff in the project locations. The first few months we needed to come to terms with the changing situation, then we gradually started talking about what still could be done and how.

¹ Centre For Good Governance (CGG)'s series of technical notes to guide international actors through effectively supporting Myanmar communities in the volatile and challenging post-coup context in Myanmar

1 A presence on the ground

The adaptation was rigorous as we could no longer work with our main stakeholder; the municipalities. Our mandate however remains the same: we are committed to strengthening democratic local governance. However, when there is no longer a democratic situation with a functioning local government, what role for VNG International is still there to play? Indeed, the coup is a real setback for the local governance progress we have carefully supported over the past years. Though much is lost and the situation is still fluid, only if we manage to stay, can we assess local developments directly and consider supporting initiatives taken by the people. Besides, VNG International has experience working in conflict situations in other countries with communities and citizens taking care of their immediate needs and organising their own services without any involvement of formal local governments. A situation that was common in Myanmar before the reforms started in 2010 as well.

We could keep DEALS and MAGIC projects going. Trust is the main driver of our contacts; through our trusted project staff we keep track of what is happening in their locations, the research tool we use are the Transition Diaries². The coup was not the first crisis we dealt with. In 2020 Myanmar had its first and second Covid wave, which affected the projects. The Myanmar government put a national and subnational emergency response structure in place. We were interested to see how this structure would function at the local level as it could accelerate decentralisation efforts. Under guidance of our Social Accountability and Gender Experts we started research done by the project staff, working with a set of questions. In regular meetings we shared information and identified possible Covid emergency support with which we could assist. As a result of this research, we allocated grants to the municipalities to address urgent Covid related needs such as PPE and other protective equipment.

After the coup, we continued this research with adapted the questions. The main purpose became to assess the changing local governance situation and to stay connected. The questions address the (non-) functioning of the local government and tensions in the townships, safety, and wellbeing of staff and that of their communities and how these communities, including IDP's deal with immediate needs to survive and stay safe; food, livelihoods, shelter, medicines etc. Apart from that, we talk about any issue that staff wants to talk about, such as providing counselling support and cyber security training.

One observation clearly stands out: till date, the military regime is not able to get control over the local government structures in most of the townships. Much tension is around the Ward Administrators and the WA offices, the third tier of the local governance system. The previously elected Ward Administrators are now being appointed by the State Administrative Council but not accepted by the people. The appointed Ward Administrators resigned in large numbers or they are considered as informants for the junta and became targets of the People's Defence Forces³.

² Transition Diaries paper part 1

³ The People's Defence Force (abbreviated PDF) is the armed wing of the National Unity Government (NUG), a body claiming to be the legitimate government of Myanmar.

The parallel government is establishing its own People's Administration structure involving household heads, community leaders and religious and traditional organisations such as funeral committees. The situation differs per township and keeps changing. The Development Affairs Committees (DACs – previously consisting of (s)elected people's representatives) stopped functioning and the Development Affairs Organisations (DAOs – the civil servants) continue their work without any involvement of the elected members of the DACs or other citizens; they have reactivated their mode of operations from before 2010.

The attacks of the military in Chin State in the past few months are upsetting and the situation in the townships in Tanintharyi Region remains tense, especially in Dawei. One of LASDN staff was detained but luckily released after three months, others have gone in hiding facing many difficulties, but they manage to stay in touch. Amidst these tremendously challenging circumstances, we collect information to support service delivery, safeguarding civic space and restoring democratic norms.

2 Flexibility to adapt

Another priority is to allow flexibility to adapt to non-state actors and project activities beyond waste management services. The DEALS Advisory Committee emphasised the importance of flexible programming in this volatile and fragile situation. It is a challenge to report against existing project frameworks whilst project activities have been adapted considerably. Existing administrative procedures can cause unnecessary risks for staff or delay crisis interventions, therefore we started piloting with small grants. The flexibility to adapt to the crisis situation further includes working with non-state actors, addressing immediate needs and services, and as mentioned, safeguarding civic space.

Non-state actors

As we could no longer engage with local authorities, we shifted to non-state actors. This shift implied working with more non-formal groups, consisting of people who know and trust each other and are working in their neighbourhoods and local communities, finding solutions for acute problems and immediate needs. Citizens lead these initiatives themselves, often in a response to emergency situation due to the coup or Covid, without any direct involvement of government agencies. This so-called community resilience is remarkable and as already mentioned, goes back to a situation that existed in Myanmar before 2010.

Addressing immediate needs

The situation changed, thus the project activities changed. First of all, finding out what can still be done takes time and effort, staff safety and security is our priority. We continue working with some of the youth and women groups already involved in waste management before the coup. However, at a much smaller scale and without the municipalities. For example, they collected and handled waste in their neighbourhoods, which was no longer or irregularly collected by the municipality.

Or, as in 2020, they addressed Covid emergencies, but this time without cooperation with the municipality and under difficult circumstances. They arranged preventive materials and organised oxygen cylinders, whilst the health system has collapsed and medical staff joined the protest movement and provided healthcare under the radar, while they risked being arrested by the junta. These informal groups reach out to vulnerable people in their communities or in IDP camps. Other community initiatives focused on educating children who could not go to school or were displaced and providing legal support to those who have been detained. Whatever activities existing or new, community groups and citizens manage – their actions are very local – small scale and often ‘under the radar.’ They obviously differ from the activities before the coup.

Safeguarding civic space and governance perspective

Due to the coup much of the progress made to strengthen democratic functioning in Myanmar may seem lost, however, the people we work with continue to use what they learned in the new situation. The narrative of a federal democratic system acknowledging diversity, has never been more advanced and outspoken as it is right now, especially by the parallel government (the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (the Myanmar legislature) CRPH / National Unity Government NUG), the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO’s) and the People’s Defence movement.

We continue stressing the importance of democratic values and principles of good (local) governance. Online webinars and trainings to address federalism, federal democracy and decentralisation are taken up by local organisations and experts and seem possible to organise. We feel an urgent need to consolidate this knowledge and the skills built over the past years. It helps to stay positive and focused on a federal and democratic way forward, especially for the youth who see their future destroyed.

As donors and international organisations do not recognise and do not engage with the military regime, their programming has now shifted to civil society organisations. We are aware that VNG International is often directly associated with (local) governments and though it is our main stakeholder and key component in governance, it is only one part of our work. We strengthen capacities of local governments in democratic functioning and being responsible to provide services, which also means inclusion of citizens and citizen groups. People’s need for services remains and needs to be addressed, especially when the junta is focused on controlling people rather than providing services to them. It is important to ensure that this governance perspective remains explicit in this shift to CSO programming and that accountability principles remain relevant in a non-democratic situation in flux. LASDN is well placed to advocate, whilst VNG International can provide expertise and share its international experiences.

Small grants management

As mentioned, project activities changed drastically. Project staff needs to be able to quickly respond to immediate and urgent needs. We mentioned already that we worked with grants during the second Covid wave. The crisis took us beyond the regular project cycle of annual planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring and learning. For project staff to respond quickly, they needed cash and delegated responsibility to act to their and their partners best judgement.

Only they can weigh the risks and take care of their own and others safety whilst addressing urgent needs. We started piloting small grants (of 700 USD): drafted guidelines to manage them, organised training sessions with project staff and agreed on reporting afterwards. It remained a challenge; to start with getting cash to the project staff. Expenditure of the small grants is explained afterwards and sometimes reported verbally to the project manager as written reports can be a risk for the staff. Another challenge was the current procurement requirements remained guiding and receipts of all costs still need to be submitted. Project staff has to be present in their locations to follow up on these requirements and obviously, they only do so if they do not put themselves and others at risk. It is a major challenge as the reality of the crisis situation in the project locations does not match with the existing project framework and arrangements agreed before the coup. This prevents us from being able to act quickly and effectively. It takes up much time and slows down support.

3 Localised leadership

VNG International in Myanmar implements the local governance projects directly or in partnership with LASDN our implementing partner. The crisis changed our working relations; one of our strengths is having a strong national team from the localities where we work. Over the past seven years we built working relations of trust and mutual respect, VNG International often initiating whilst LASDN is implementing. The crisis changed our roles. More than ever, we rely on our staff and partner's capacities to assess the situation and respond to it. Their judgements of the situation including the risks they take matter most. Our Myanmar staff and LASDN staff are in the lead, they know best, we need to listen carefully and offer the support they ask for.

If at all the crisis can bring about any positive change, it is this so-called localisation: to acknowledge that the national/local leaders and experts are in the lead and guide future development programmes and actions. It would change a trend of the past ten years in which big international stakeholders continued to dictate the development agenda, quite often driven by competition. A trend which the Myanmar national government allowed to happen not offering clear policies and guidelines for coordinated development cooperation. If there is an opportunity to change this pattern, it is now. It requires as much a change from the international community to step back, adopt a bottom-up approach and listen more carefully as for the national/local organisations to step up and take the lead. Will it happen? It should be the main focus in CSO programming and include support for strengthening organisational and leadership capacities.

Conclusion

We were determined to keep our presence on the ground; the partial suspension of the projects allowed us to do so. It has proven to be crucial for continuing our support to the people of Myanmar. To communicate and stay connected during the crisis became an end in itself. It helped us to share everything that needed to be shared and for the local staff to feel supported. The research helped us to assess the local governance situation and anticipate possible actions. Project staff stayed engaged amidst security assessments and identify ways forward.

Obviously, the support extends outside and beyond the existing commitments and project frameworks agreed before the coup. This was a challenge as the existing project framework remained the main reference with limited room for change. It was challenging when administrative procedures tended to take over reality on the ground.

In VNG International, we should assess and mitigate risks pro-actively and share them with our national staff and partner. We should negotiate with our donors to allow flexibility to adapt to the changing situation as well. In the end, we aim at restoring civic space, governance and democratic norms and strengthen capacities of staff and others to resist the military regime and advocate for human rights. These are key components for further developing a crisis approach whilst adhering to local governance and democratic principles.

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